

***KATWON*: CAUGHT IN THE CURRENTS OF CHANGE**  
**Youth and Education in a Changing Society**

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction 1–3

Autobiographical Sketch 4–7

Historical Background 8–14

KATWON: Caught in the Currents of Change 15–19

The History of GED in the RMI 20–25

Interviews and Analysis 26–61

- I. The Second Chance 26–36
- II. The Best Chance 27–51
- III. The Alternate Choice 52–61

GED: An Assessment of the Problem 62–67

The RMI Equivalency Diploma: The Response 68–70

Conclusion 71–78

Bibliography 78–81

## **INTRODUCTION**

Rapid culture change in any society is often met with conflicting degrees of acceptance as well as rejection. Yet, the survival of all cultures is dependent on their ability to confront change in ways that rejuvenate that culture rather than destroy its uniqueness. Cultures that try to evade dealing with the challenges presented by the changes confronting their society, fail not only to meet the needs of the community, but may also be responsible for the deterioration of social conditions within the society.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is an example of a unique culture that is confronted by rapid culture change resulting in the dilemma and paradox of anticipated and desired change. This is compounded by its geographical isolation and widely dispersed social and economic structure. In order to achieve the imperative convergence of social, economic, and political development required for self-sufficiency, the Marshallese community is forced to make decisions today that will impact the future of their nation.

The research conducted for this paper focuses on problems in implementing Western style education in the RMI as it attempts to respond to the new and daunting challenges required of their nation in order to meet the needs of its citizens. Education is one of the most important social institutions in any society, and is responsible for

insuring the perpetuation of social relationships that grow out of the norms and values that bring members of the community together in search of a common goal.

The problems that are faced by contemporary youth and their families are central then to the future development of the Marshall Islands. The struggle of the youth to confront and incorporate modern Western style education into the inadequate and deficient standard educational system in the RMI is crucial to their success in the emerging global community. Although educational opportunities are limited and fail to meet all the requirements of youth, the youth of today will be the ones who will need the understanding and ability to consolidate their changed circumstances with traditional Marshallese society.

The federally designed and funded General Education Diploma (GED), or high school equivalency exam, administered in the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) attracts students to the program from all sectors of the community. Although many of these students failed to complete high school for personal reasons, the inadequate circumstances of education in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) are also emphasized. Thus, the problems faced by the participants in the GED program present a microcosm for study of education in the RMI. The deficiencies of standard education in the nation are not only highlighted, but they may also indicate the system's failure to meet the needs of the youth of the nation.

Traditional Marshallese ways of responding to culture change have also been incorporated in the final analysis of the problems facing education in the RMI, to demonstrate the ways in which culture change is confronted by the Marshallese

community. The conflicts between traditional culture and the demands of change may appear to be discouraging, and unsolvable. Yet traditional methods of conflict resolution may hold the key to the successful assimilation and acculturation of these changes within the established community.

Rapid social change comparable to that experienced by the youth of the Marshall Islands stipulates that education must be the priority of the RMI if the nation is to achieve its objectives of social, economic, and political self-sufficiency. When this is accomplished, not only will the demands of rapid social change be met but the future of the RMI will also be assured. Only by accomplishing this basic need of the nation for adequate education can the future prosperity of the RMI be guaranteed for generations to come.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

My birthplace may have been far from the Marshall Islands both culturally and geographically, but significant events in my life have led me to call the Republic of the Marshall Islands my home. When I first arrived in the Marshalls in 1968, only a week or so after I graduated from college, I found that my knowledge about the Pacific and its inhabitants was very limited. I wanted to learn more about my chosen home. That is what has influenced my decision to pursue an MA in Pacific Islands Studies. In many respects, it is my way of “legitimizing” the knowledge that I have accumulated through my experiences during the years I have lived in the islands.

I was born on August 17, 1946, in Portsmouth Ohio, a small manufacturing town located on the convergence of the Ohio and Scioto rivers. During ancient times, the same location had also served as a center for the indigenous mound builders, and later the Shawnee nation. Today, the area has begun to stagnate on the fringes of the economically and socially depressed region of the US known as Appalachia.

My interest in world cultures and the human condition influenced me to pursue a BA at Heidelberg College in northern Ohio. I graduated with a double major in sociology and religion, with minors in psychology and education. My goal was to become either a youth counselor or a youth minister. While at Heidelberg, I met and later married a young man from the Marshall Islands. He was also pursuing a degree in sociology, but with a second major in political science. He had learned of the

— college from one of the government contract teachers who had attended the school.

When we finished college, we decided to live and work in the Marshall Islands.

When I first came to the Marshall Islands in 1968, I was very fortunate to have arrived in the islands at a time before the culture was changed in dramatic ways. The vast increase in capital expenditure in the 1960's by the United States that was approved by US President Kennedy and later implemented under President Johnson effectively changed the once independent indigenous culture into one dependent on American aid.

On my arrival, I was employed by UPCS (Uluga Protestant Church School) teaching English as a foreign language. Yet, I soon realized that I needed to learn some of the Marshallese language in order to be an effective teacher. My students probably taught me more of their language that year than I was able to teach them English, but the cultural gap was broken. When one of the Peace Corp teachers at the government high school terminated her contract early, I also took over her typing classes even though I had no real training in that subject.

In 1970, after two years in the Marshalls, my husband accepted a position in the administrative capitol of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) located on Saipan, in the Northern Mariana Islands. He held the post of Public Health Planning Administrator within the Headquarters Department of Health Services.

At the same time, I accepted a position at Marianas High School again teaching typing and fulfilling the contract of a person who left early. After that first semester, I

was assigned classes more in line with my training. Although my class load included some English classes, I began to develop classes in Sociology for secondary students as well as a class called Micronesia: a Changing Society.

In the early 1970's when the debate began about the political future of the TTPI began, I also tried to incorporate an element of political education in my classes on the changes facing Micronesian societies. Since I had students from all six of the districts included in the TTPI, I was able to have debates among the students about the various choices proposed by the United States negotiating team.

In 1976, after seven years on Saipan, my husband felt the need to return to the Marshalls and run for the Congress of Micronesia that could enable him to participate more fully in the status negotiations. He was successful in his bid for office, but a political career is uncertain, and we decided to start a retail business to counter the uncertainty of politics and insure the future of our two children. During the next ten years, I helped my husband with the business and supplemented my children's education by teaching them at home in addition to their regular school classes.

As a parent, I not only became involved in the school activities of my children, but also began to see the problems facing education in the Marshall Islands on a more up close and personal basis. Participating in school activities with the other parents also helped me to begin to understand some of the concerns of the community, as well as see first hand some of the problems facing education in the RMI.



When my husband suffered a stroke in 1986 on the floor of the legislature debating what constituted the proper utilization of government funds, my life took a different turn. We relocated to Hawaii for his health care, and transferred our children in school there. I had always been the teacher in Micronesia, but it soon became apparent to me the deficiencies my children had to overcome in order to succeed in school in Hawaii. I again became the observer by joining in my children's school activities, but this time I also felt like an outsider. Yet, this experience has given me insight into what is needed in the RMI in order to bring education into compliance with standard modern education.

When my youngest child graduated from high school in Hawaii, I returned to the Marshalls and began teaching in the GED program at the College of the Marshall Islands.(CMI) The constant influx of students into the program as well as the high drop out rate made trying to teach writing in English as well as grammar very frustrating. The unstructured and non-graded design of the program did not encourage the students to excel in the subject area or offer standards for achievement. Too often, a student's success was based solely on passing the final test.

I am now an instructor at CMI, and can view the success and failure of my students from very different points of view. From what I have observed, both the inadequacies of education in the RMI as well as the attitudes of the community toward education must change if there is to be success. The nation must begin to realize that there is no quick fix when it comes to the education of its youth. I firmly believe that the future of the nation lies in the proper education of its youth.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Republic of the Marshall Islands “consists of 29 atolls each made up of many islets and 5 islands in the central pacific between 4 degrees and 14 degrees North and between 160 degrees and 173 degrees East. The atolls and islands are situated in two parallel chains like formations known as the *Ratak* (Sunrise) group and the *Ralik* (Sunset) group. The total number of islands and islets in the whole Republic is approximately 1225 spreading across a sea area of over 750,000 square miles. The total land area is approximately 70 square miles (181 square kilometers). The mean height of the land is about seven feet above sea level (2 meters).” (RMI 1998/99:3)

The islands are susceptible to typhoons, *El Nino* generated droughts, and tidal flooding, making them one of the most tenuous ecosystems on earth to support human habitation.

The indigenous people of the Marshall Islands originated from the Austronesian diaspora of seafaring migrants who left insular Southeast Asia around five thousand years ago on journeys of planned settlement. Their seafaring culture included a vast array of survival skills, including an extensive knowledge of the natural world. Reflecting the planned nature of their migration, they brought with them domestic animals and the seeds and cuttings of food and medicinal plants essential for their existence.

The society that evolved in the atoll environment was organized ~~GE~~ around extended families and a matrilineal social organization made up of clans (*jowi*) and lineages (*bwij*). Marshallese society was arranged in three stratified, hereditary, hierarchical levels – chief (*iroij*), lineage head (*alap*), and worker (*dri jerbal*) - that determined the distribution of the limited land resources as well as the produce of both land and sea. In order to perpetuate their culture and understanding of their physical, spiritual, and experienced worlds, knowledge and learning was protected and passed on to future generations through oral traditions, chants, and legends, further binding the community together as a separate cultural and ethnic group.

For good reasons, Marshallese had a reputation for hostility towards all invaders, whether from within the *Ratak* and *Ralik* island chains or from the larger outside world. As one consequence, the atolls were largely left alone and relatively isolated from external influences. That ended, however, with the successive sighting of the northernmost atolls by the Spanish explorer, Alvaro de Saavedra, in the early 1500's. (Sharp 1962:23). Although the discovery of these atolls was recorded in the logbooks of de Saavedra and other explorers who followed, the early contacts, for whatever reason, fail to appear in the oral history and collective memory of the Islanders.

In contrast, the arrival of Christian missionaries aboard the mission packet *Morning Star* on Ebon Atoll on November 1857 represented an invasion of the islands that would permanently transform Marshallese society. (Hezel 1983:201) The missionaries were from the New England based American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In their efforts to convert the Marshallese to Christianity, the

missionaries taught the islanders to read and write, thus changing the integral until now oral element of their culture. Not only were the islanders asked to change their beliefs, but also many of the traditional ways of conducting their everyday lives. They were no longer isolated from change, but change was to become a constant element in their lives. In addition, the success of the missionaries paved the way for traders and other outsiders to enter the islands, thus opening a floodgate of change in the islands.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the islands had effectively lost their sovereignty as they began to play a role in the world economy. The increasing value of copra brought foreign trading companies to the islands aiming to profit from the flourishing market in oil from processed coconuts. (copra) Eventually, as German commercial interests grew in the Marshall Islands, a formal treaty was signed on 29 November 1878 that formally cemented the relationship between the German government and the *Ralik* chiefs leading eventually to the full annexation of the Marshall Islands. (Hezel 1983:298)

As a result of their association with Germany and without the Islander' knowledge or approval, the Marshall Islands were to become a pawn in the ever volatile European power struggle. By 1914, hostilities in Europe had escalated, and Germany was at the center of one of the most destructive of these struggles, World War I, fighting in opposition to Great Britain and its allies, which included Japan. Without the approval of its allies in the West, Japan entered the war turning their attention on the German overseas territories in the Pacific. Although the Japanese takeover of the Marshall

Islands was both peaceful and unsanctioned, the newly formed League of Nations eventually recognized it.

Whereas the Germans were interested in commerce and the profitability of their overseas territory, the Japanese wanted to absorb the Marshall Islands into the Japanese Empire in an effort to both expand its physical boundaries and its political influence. With this in mind, the Japanese launched an initiative to win the hearts and minds of the Islanders. They organized primary schools that taught two subjects – Japanese language proficiency and basic math skills – along with daily patriotic exercises focussing on building loyalty to the Emperor. (Howe 1994:102) However, by 1937, diplomatic relations between Japan and the Western powers had deteriorated beyond compromise, and Japan began to aggressively fortify some of the major atolls in the Marshalls – Kwajalein, Wotje, Mili, Jaluit, and Maloelap - in preparation for war. Although relations between the resident Japanese and the Marshallese had previously been benign and friendly, they quickly deteriorated into one of dominance and subjugation. While the Japanese had previously provided for the welfare and wellbeing of the Marshallese, they now required their intensive labor not only to build airfields but also to provide food for the resident military personnel. Nonetheless, it was understood from the inception of the Japanese fortification of the islands that the needs of the military would at all times supercede the needs of the indigenous population.

Subsequently, on 7 December 1941, Japan launched simultaneous aggressive assaults against Hawaii and Guam, both American possessions in the Pacific. (Howe

1998: 149) The ferocity of these attacks stunned the United States, and within a relatively short time, it mobilized its forces against Japan. The Marshalls are the closest of the Micronesian islands to Hawaii, and they were the first to come under attack. The islands quickly fell to the Americans after the US military retaliated with nightly bombing raids on the five entrenched atolls. Thus the vital supply lines to the Japanese military on the atolls were destroyed eventually leading to the military collapse of the islands. By April 1944, the Marshalls Islands were effectively under US military control. (Peattie 1988:271)

In an effort to bring the war to a rapid close, US President Harry Truman authorized the use of a previously untried weapon developed by American scientists that was to become the most devastating weapon ever used in warfare –the atomic bomb. Accordingly, on 6 August and 8 August 1945, atomic bombs were dropped on two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (Howe 1994:152) While the world reacted in horror at the excesses of death and destruction brought about by the war, the United Nations, a newly formed world body, took a more decisive stand against war and the colonial rule

To strengthen and implement this position, the United Nations organized the trusteeship system that would oversee the future of territories that had been under the authority of the former League of Nations Mandate. The area of Micronesia that had been under Japanese rule was included, and it became the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (USTTPI) in 1947. Following the Japanese arrangement, the Marshall Islands was one of several districts into which Micronesia had been divided for

administrative purposes. As the responsible administering authority, the United States was obligated to prepare the USTTPI for political self-determination and economic self-sufficiency as well as develop health and educational systems in the islands.(Howe 1998:229)

In the early 1960's, the United States came under pressure from the United Nations to increase the pace of social and economic development and move the islands along to some form of self-government. Actual negotiations began in 1969. It was initially assumed that the USTTPI would remain united and form a single nation. However, unity would not prevail. Micronesians were divided over cultural, linguistic, and other differences. Eventually, four separate entities emerged from the USTTPI. The Marshall Islands was one of the four. It entered into its own negotiations with the United States, and a political arrangement of self-government in free association with the United States was agreed upon in 1986. (Howe 1994:302)

A Compact of Free Association (COFA) outlines the terms of the arrangement. The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is a self-governing nation in free association with the United States. Its people are citizens of their own nation, but they have the right to freely enter, live, and work in the United States. The United States provides an economic subsidy to support the new nation and promote economic development. The RMI also remains eligible for many federal programs and services that were introduced during the trusteeship. In return, and reflecting the lesson learned from World War II, the arrangement allows the United States to deny access to the islands to any potential hostile nation. (Howe 1994:303)

In 1983, the people of the Marshalls voted in favor of free association, and after congressional approval it was implemented by presidential decree in 1986. In 1990, the United States gave its stamp of approval to the arrangement. On September 17, 1991 the RMI became a member of the United Nations in its own right (Kiste 1993:70-79).

Since the implementation of the COFA, Marshallese have migrated to the United States and its territories in large numbers, and there are now sizeable populations in Arkansas, California, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, Guam, Hawai'i, Oklahoma, and Washington, D.C.

The many federal programs that have been available since the trusteeship have continued and increased in number under the COFA. As a result, the islands have effectively become a welfare state reliant on American and other donors. The people have become accustomed to an unrealistic and artificial standard of living that cannot be sustained by their own limited human and natural resources. The future of the Marshalls is at a crossroads of social, political, and economic development that must be addressed by all segments of the society. Decisions made today will determine the future of the islands.



**Katwon: Caught in the Currents of Change**

**Youth and Education in a Changing Society**

“The ‘youth problem’ is not the problem of the young alone;  
it is a problem of the entire society.” (Hezel 1976)

Culture change is an inevitable condition of the human experience, whether it is a product of adaptation to existing environmental and social conditions or a result of contact with similar or opposing cultures. Indigenous people throughout the world struggle with accepting, rejecting, or adapting to rapidly changing conditions with often dramatic repercussions that have been thrust upon them by powerful, radically different, and often aggressive cultures. As a once culturally cohesive society, the indigenous people of the Marshall Islands are currently experiencing disruptive culture change.

Ultimately, while striving to maintain cultural integrity, the struggle of the Marshallese to function and cope within their changing society can be represented by a single word in the Marshallese language: *katwon*. In a somewhat negative sense, it means to manipulate in order to get what one wants or desires. In a more positive sense, it means to adjust or adapt. Thus within the concept of *katwon*, the ambiguous nature of rapid culture change is revealed. On the one hand, change is welcomed even to the point of being encouraged despite the apparent negative conditions that are associated with change. On the other hand, change is perceived and understood to be destructive of the unique traditions that define their society. The challenge for

Marshallese society then is to obtain a sense of balance between desired change and the protection of their cultural traditions.

From my own observations of the contemporary scene, the outcome of rapid cultural change in the Marshalls is visible in the deterioration of cultural norms, values, and forms of social controls that have traditionally integrated this autonomous island culture. There is a cultural vacuum that leaves a void, and the society is torn between tradition and modernity. On the one hand, there is an increased desire for new imported items, yet the mechanisms to accommodate or assimilate them are either deficient or missing. Outer islanders have moved in large numbers to the RMI's two major urban centers: Ebeye at Kwajalein Atoll and the nation's capital on Majuro Atoll. However, employment opportunities are limited. In the recent past, new migrants found support from family members already resident in the urban areas. In contrast today, crowded living conditions and the reliance of many people on a few wage earners have caused problems and an erosion of extended families. A money economy has effectively replaced a traditional subsistence lifestyle with an increasing level of economic stress for all concerned. Rapid population growth has also put pressure on family groups and has made existing educational and health services inadequate. The breakdown of family groups along with the erosion of traditional social controls is becoming more apparent. Malnutrition of the young, alcohol abuse, gang violence, prostitution, and suicide are accelerating at a disturbing rate. Drug abuse is on the rise, and death by accident (often drug induced) is becoming more frequent. Movies, television, and the ability to migrate to the United States have

engendered unattainable hopes, desires and aspirations. There is also a growing disparity in the distribution of wealth, and the gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” is further fragmenting society.

The youth of any society are always perched on the cutting edge of change, and they are the ones most likely to confront change head on as a desirable and welcome occurrence. Caught in the turmoil of a rapidly changing society, the youth of the Marshall Islands look to the future for answers, yet they are caught in a culture that views conformity to the past as guidance for behavior. Traditionally, respect was given to their chiefs and the senior members of their clans who were figures of authority as defined by the hierarchical system of land rights that underlies the structure of Marshallese society. Youth are encouraged to defer to tradition and patiently wait, but youth is not patient. Subsequently, frustration and lack of fulfillment begin to build. “Our young people have the potential to develop the Pacific to greater heights. However, if they are ignored and not taken seriously they can become instruments of anti social behavior, increasing crime and other ills of modernity and producing a future generation with bleak futures.” (Veramu 1997:55)

Some of the greatest challenges that confront the youth of the Marshall Islands are in the arena of modern education. Formal education and the guidance of family and peer groups provide the socialization of the members of any community. In the modern world, Western education represents foreign concepts that relate to time, space and interpersonal relationships. In the presence of such ambivalence, the varied notions embodied in the notion of *kotwan* come into play. While young Marshallese

acknowledge the importance of education, acceptance encounters some degree of cultural resistance. On the one hand, Marshallese understand that education is not only a requirement but also a prerequisite for success. On the other hand, there is also the realization that all their efforts to succeed will fail if the social, cultural, and economic constraints that hold them back are not addressed. While they realize that education holds the key to their success or failure in this ever-changing society, there is also an awareness of the dismally low level of actual success. Therein lies much of the frustration and disappointment that has shaped the experience of today's youth in the Marshall Islands.

Education in the Marshall Islands is challenged by many of the same social problems confronting other developing nations in the region that also face the formidable task of modernization. The shift from a subsistence to a cash economy causes major disruptions. The Western work ethic is not compatible with the flexible scheduling of time of island life, and long-range planning is neither practiced nor valued. In spite of the value attached to education, there is little or no social stigma attached to failure in academic endeavors. While the RMI has passed legislation that requires school attendance through the eighth grade, it is not strictly enforced anywhere. While secondary education is not mandatory, it is encouraged and desired.

Uncontrolled population growth has also placed tremendous pressure on all aspects of the public infrastructure, including education. Public schools are not only overcrowded and inadequate, but are unable to cope with the demands placed on them. The existing facilities are not only deteriorated, but they are also increasingly unable

to accommodate the spiraling population. At the same time, the RMI government faces a budget deficit that may well reduce funding for education. Private religious institutions fill some of the void, but the costs are prohibitive for most students and their families. As a result, many students terminate their education while others who can afford education are unable to attend school because of over-crowding.

As a result, some Marshallese parents are sending their children to Hawaii, Guam, and the US mainland to stay with relatives, merely transferring the problem to another place while simultaneously destroying the student's support system. Consequently, many students attend school irregularly, eventually dropping out altogether. They often end up inflating the health statistics of uncurbed teen pregnancy, high rates of STD's (sexually transmitted diseases), uncontrolled gang activity, and rampant anti-social alcohol and substance abuse. They are the ones driven to committing suicide, further contributing to the already unprecedented high rates of self-inflicted death among young adult males. Trapped in a system that has failed them, they have become a burden on society. Many are on the periphery of the culture and are unable to function within the contemporary society.

## **THE HISOTRY OF GED IN THE RMI**

The study of problems facing young adults and teens in the Marshall Islands appears to be overwhelming. Nevertheless, it can be manageable when focusing on these same problems within the framework of the GED (General Education Diploma) or high school equivalency program. Young adults studying for the GED open a window of opportunity for studying this group while simultaneously providing insight into the problems facing Marshallese youth. The GED program not only addresses the situation directly but it also offers a chance to identify and analyze possible solutions.

GED has become not only a way of circumventing the current inadequacies in the contemporary education system, but may also be the only educational opportunity available to many students who would otherwise not be in school. In this way, the program offers a microcosm of all the problems facing the society, thereby presenting a forum for inquiry.

The General Education Diploma (GED) is a United States federally funded program designed to offer those students with some secondary education, who have dropped out of school before graduation, an alternate way to complete school. A GED diploma is verification that students have the basic educational skills required to become productive members of the community, thereby increasing their standard of living and furthering the advancement of the community as a whole. The program has been enthusiastically embraced by the Marshallese community and culturally

modified to address the inadequate educational opportunities available to students in the community.

The GED exam is a US standardized test based on accepted American educational guidelines, and is universally accepted as proof of success. It is honored by colleges and universities throughout the world, allowing those who pass the exam the opportunity for tertiary education. The GED test that is administered in the RMI is the same exam given to all students within the United States or any of its territories. While the exam was initially offered to citizens of the Marshall Islands when it was one of the administrative districts within the US TTPI, it continues to be available as an ongoing program accessible through the Compact of Free Association negotiated with the United States. Since the GED test is based on the minimum requirements for standard education in the United States, the test is difficult for most students in the Marshalls and few pass the test on their first attempt.

To qualify for the GED exam, a student must be at least sixteen years old and have had some formal education. As long as the registration and testing fee of fifty dollars is paid in advance of the scheduled exam, anyone can take the test at any time it is given. Although it is strongly encouraged that students complete all of the preparatory classes before attempting the exam, it is not a prerequisite to actually taking the GED test. Any preparatory instructional courses offered by the program are both optional and taken at the discretion of each student.

In an effort to help increase the success rate of students registering for the program, five classes are offered in math, science, social studies, reading (English),

and writing (English). A registration fee of seventy-five dollars is required for applicants needing the preparatory classes. It covers both the twenty-five dollar registration fee and fifty dollars for the five classes at ten dollars per class, as well as the cost of the GED exam.

Before registering for the classes, students are given a proficiency test to determine their level. A student may enter the program at any one of three levels: 1. Basic, 2. Pre-GED, and 3. GED. Instructional classes are conducted in each level during a standard fourteen-week semester with the GED exam administered at the close of the semester. The classes are taught on a non-graded basis with only the recommendation of the instructor necessary for advancement to a higher level.

Although not required by the guidelines of the program, an attendance policy has been introduced due to the high absentee rate among program participants. Absenteeism may in part explain the poor success rate of many students when taking the GED exam. There appears to be little or no comprehension within the community of the correlation between the degree of personal commitment to education and the actual outcome. The GED diploma has become the goal of many students whereas the acquisition of learning skills is not a priority. Western education however demands consistent commitment if there is to be progress. Until Western education becomes the highest priority among the Marshallese, there will continue to be deficiencies in education in the RMI as measured by exams such as the GED exam.

Recently, the students registering for the GED program are generally much younger, and have dropped out of school at a lower grade level than when the GED



program was first introduced in the Marshalls. One of the main attractions of the GED program has always been the ability to achieve a secondary school diploma after the fourteen-week instructional period. This may also have given students the mistaken impression that they can condense four years of secondary education into one semester. Many participants appear to be attempting to do this, but they are not succeeding since the gap in their education is too great to be bridged.

Most students entering the GED program cite financial hardship as one of the reasons for choosing the GED program. However, there is no tuition cost for a public education and the majority of students who apply are accepted. Only the preferred private schools require the payment of tuition. Although the education system in the RMI is facing many difficulties as well as deficiencies, no one is denied the opportunity for elementary education.

Within the Marshalls, there has always been a great deal of movement between islands, atolls, and family groups that is most beneficial to the individual or family group involved in the move. However, this movement has also included education, with students moving easily in and out of school as well as transferring from school to school if conditions are not to their satisfaction. Culturally, the fourteen-week GED program has appealed to many Marshallese as one of achieving their diploma without the long-term commitment of a standard secondary education.

The GED program in the RMI is administered by the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) by contract with the GED Testing Service in Washington, DC. Although not required by the Testing Service, any fee for both the classes as well as

the GED test may be assessed at the option of the CMI Board of Regents. This is to cover both the cost of the instructional materials used by the program and the final exam.

All student examinations are sent to the GED Testing Service in Washington, DC for grading and evaluation. Meeting at four-year intervals, the GED Testing Service also determines the minimum passing score for each state, territory, or center where the GED test is administered. Although the designated passing score may vary between the various testing centers, the passing scores are consistently increased in an effort to raise the level of competency of the GED exam.

When the GED test was initially administered in the Marshalls during the Trusteeship, a student was able to pass each of the five subject components of the exam individually until all had been successfully completed. The GED diploma then would be awarded when a passing score on all of the subject areas had been achieved. At that time, a lower passing grade of thirty was also required for each of the five subject components of the test. Both the lower minimum passing score and the ability to complete the subject areas separately allowed many students to obtain their secondary education.

In 1996, however, a major shift in policy occurred in the way that the GED exam was administered. At that time, it was determined by the GED Testing Service in Washington DC that program participants must complete all components of the exam simultaneously in order to qualify for the GED equivalency diploma. At the same time, a minimum score of forty was needed to pass each subject component with an

overall average of forty-five on all components required to successfully achieve their equivalency diploma. Effectively, this shift in policy has prevented many participants in the Marshalls from successfully passing the GED exam. The actual success rate has also drastically declined.

Faced with an increasing rate of illiteracy in the nation, government leaders began to look at the GED program as one way of raising scholastic standards as well as addressing the critical condition of education in the nation. Yet, the low success rate of most of the program participants was discouraging, and could not be relied on to offer much assistance. To counter this dim projection, in 1999, the Cabinet of the *Nitigela* (legislature of the Marshall Islands) approved funding for the establishment of the RMI equivalency exam to be administered in conjunction with, and as an alternate to, the GED exam.

The RMI equivalency exam follows the fundamental guidelines of the GED program with a minimum qualifying standard equal to the entrance requirements of the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI). The projection is that the RMI equivalency exam will be more in line with the educational base of the community, allowing more students to either qualify for tertiary education or entry to CMI, thus contributing to the professional level and needs of the Marshall Islands.

## INTERVIEWS AND ANALYSIS

### ***GED: Second Chance, Best Chance, or Alternate Choice***

In order to understand more fully the relationship between social change and education in a rapidly changing society, ten interviews were conducted with past and present GED participants. The interviews were conducted in both the Marshallese and English languages in an attempt to avoid subtle cultural misrepresentations. The interviews were then analyzed for content and purpose of the participant's circumstances as well as the cultural and social implications that brought them into the GED program.

The findings from the ten interviews can be arranged into three basic categories. The first of these includes those participants who most closely represent the original intent of the GED program – to give a second chance to students who have basically completed their education, but dropped out before completing school. The second category addresses cultural and social issues in the Marshall Islands that have interfered with the ability to complete secondary education. The third and final category identifies some economic factors and false expectations that need to be considered where the rapid pace of change has outdistanced the community's ability to either contend with or address cultural and social change in a positive and productive way. Many students have taken advantage of the exam to complete their high school, but the test is difficult and many have been unable to succeed.

## ***I. The Second Chance***

The first category of students who have been successful are those who fit within the guidelines of the program. They are older than the minimum age requirement of sixteen and have completed the majority of their high school. The following three interviews are examples of students who fall within of this first category, and all successfully completed the GED exam on their first attempt. It is important to note that each of these students had the advantage of living in one of the two urban centers where social and cultural change were a constant demand in their lives. Each of he three had also attended a private school that conducted classes in both English and Marshallese.

### ***INTERVIEW WITH SABRINA KAMINAGA***

**Entered: 12/95**

**Graduated: 12/95**

Sabrina Kaminaga is an example of a Marshallese student in this first category that has successfully completed the GED exam as outlined in the program guidelines. She had completed both primary and more than half of secondary school, but had dropped out after her junior year due to an early marriage and subsequent pregnancy. A year later, she applied to take the GED exam and successfully passed on her first attempt.

Sabrina was the fourth of seven children of parents who had both completed their AA Degrees. Education was valued in her family, and Sabrina was encouraged and supported

in her educational accomplishments and aspirations. She had always lived in the crowded urban center where she accepted the constant influx of new imported items as normal.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

**SK:** *I attended Assumption Elementary School, a private Catholic school located on Majuro Atoll.*

BC: How old were you when you began school?

**SK:** *I was six years old when I started first grade.*

BC: Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

**SK:** *I was living with my parents.*

BC: Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

**SK:** *It was continuous, because I completed Assumption Elementary School and then went on to Assumption High School in the same place.*

BC: Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems?

**SK:** *It was a good experience.*

BC: What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

**SK:** *I didn't have any problems in school. I dropped out of school during my junior year because of my pregnancy.*

BC: Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?

**SK:** *Yes. They were very helpful.*

BC: When did you drop out of school?

**SK:** *I dropped out when I was in the eleventh grade.*

BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out of school?

**SK:** *My pregnancy.*

BC: When and how did you learn about the GED program?

**SK:** *I learned about GED from an announcement on the radio.*

BC: Why did you choose GED rather than public or private high school to complete your education?

**SK:** *It was faster.*

BC: Have you found that GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?

**SK:** *Yes. It was hard but worth it.*

BC: Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands.

**SK:** *It was very valuable.*

BC: Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?

**SK:** *I found it more difficult because I didn't know some of the questions.*

BC: Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in government or private schools?

**SK:** *Yes. 100%. I recommend it to my other fellow citizens.*

BC: In what ways would you change the GED program to make it more effective for the Marshallese students?

**SK:** *I would make the GED test both Marshallese and American standard so that the test would be easier for Marshallese to pass.*

BC: What would you like to do after passing the GED exam?

**SK:** *I have already received my GED diploma and am now attending CMI. After I graduate from CMI, I want to go to a four-year college in the states.*

BC: What are your plans for the future?

**SK:** *If I can get my BA, I'll come back and work for my people.*

BC: Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?

**SK:** *Yes. Since I entered school I have always worked.*

BC: In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students who desire to complete their education?

**SK:** *School is more expensive and the pressure from friends is getting stronger. Students are more likely to listen to their friends.*

After completing her GED exam, Sabrina applied and was accepted for admittance to the College of the Marshall Islands. She has achieved her own goals as well as those of the GED program, and sets an example for others to follow. For Sabrina, the GED

program worked as planned, because her situation fell within the original parameters of the GED program. At the same time, she also understood the value and importance of education in fulfilling her goals, because she had accepted her changing society as beneficial to the island community.

### ***INTERVIEW WITH ERNEST KAWAKAMI***

**Entered: 6/1997**

**Graduated: 6/1997**

Ernest Kawakami is another example of a GED student who entered within the original guidelines of the program. Like Sabrina, Ernest had also been educated at private schools. He began elementary school at Assumption Elementary School, a Catholic institution, but later entered another private school, Calvary High School, which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God, a Protestant Pentecostal church. However, he dropped out of school altogether in the ninth grade. Since an eighth grade education was the highest level of education required by the community, Ernest had no difficulty in finding employment. At age thirty, after many years working in the public sector, Ernest applied to the GED program to complete his education. Not only would a high school diploma allow him to earn a higher wage, but also it would enable him to enter college and pursue a degree in his chosen field of marine science.

Ernest is the third out of seven children, all of whom are either presently attending or have completed secondary or tertiary education. Education was a family value and the demands of a changing culture were accepted as the standard. Although Ernest dropped



out of school, he eventually returned, realizing that his future and that of the Marshall Islands could only be attained through education.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

**EK:** *I went to Assumption Elementary School, and later Calvary High School. Finally, I went to GED.*

BC: How old were you when you began school?

**EK:** *I began school when I was five years old.*

BC: Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

**EK:** *When I was in elementary school, I lived with my parents. When I received my GED diploma, I was living by myself.*

BC: Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

**EK:** *I used to move from place to place before I received my diploma.*

BC: Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems?

**EK:** *Honestly speaking, I didn't learn much from the previous schools I attended. Maybe the problem was either I or the teaching method.*

BC: What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

**EK:** *There were many obstacles that restrained my education. 1. my friends in the neighborhood, 2. my lack of confidence in myself, and 3. Seeing education as another waste of my time.*

BC: Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?

**EK:** *To some extent yes, but not like the teachers in the GED program.*

BC: When did you drop out of school?

**EK:** *I dropped out of school in my freshman year in high school.*

BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out of school?

**EK:** *I thought by dropping out of school and finding a job was the sure way for me. I found out later that I made a very big mistake dropping out of school.*

BC: When and how did you learn about the GED (General Education Diploma) program?

**EK:** *I learned about GED from a radio program.*

BC: Why did you choose GED rather than public or private high school to complete your education?

**EK:** *By the time I enrolled in the program I was thirty years old. There is no way private or government school could enroll a thirty-year-old student in high school in the Marshall Islands.*

BC: Have you found that GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?

**EK:** *Absolutely yes. I was able to continue my education, and am now in my second year at the college. My goal is to get a Ph.D. in marine biology.*

BC: Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands?

**EK:** *Absolutely yes. The GED program has a necessary place in the Marshall Islands. Without the program hundreds of dropout students wouldn't have a second chance to obtain a high school diploma which is necessary to have a better life of their own.*

BC: Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?

**EK:** *The GED is more advanced. It helps prepare students for a higher level of education such as college or overseas university.*

BC: Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in government or private school?

**EK:** *I have promoted the GED program ever since I received my diploma to friends and family members. To get a quality education, GED is the right choice.*

BC: In what ways would you change the GED to make it more effective for Marshallese students?

**EK:** *There is nothing to change. It is effective as it is.*

BC: What would you like to do after passing the GED exam?

**EK:** *I have already received my GED diploma.*

BC: What are your plans for your future?

**EK:** *To complete my education in my field of study, and come back to the island and work for the people.*

BC: Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?

**EK:** *The instructors have helped me to learn.*

BC: In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students desiring to complete their education?

**EK:** *Without the program, people like me and many more to come would not have a second chance to obtain a high school diploma, which is the key to our future.*

Although Ernest had entered the GED program after many years out of school, he was also successful on his first attempt. His continued involvement in various government agencies had given him not only a practical learning environment but had also allowed him to develop within the community as one of the implementers of social development and change. Completing his high school diploma was only the first step on the road to achieving his goal. He subsequently entered and graduated with an AA degree from the College of the Marshall Islands, and is now attending the University of Hawaii, Hilo. Someday, he may achieve a doctorate in marine science as he hopes. The GED program has given him the opportunity to succeed.

### ***INTERVIEW WITH VICENT LAKJOHN***

**Entered: 9/1998**

**Graduated: 9/98**

Vincent Lakjohn, like Sabrina and Ernest, had completed most of his secondary education when he dropped out of school, and like the others had passed the GED test on his first attempt. He had always lived on Ebeye, Kwajalein atoll, one of the most crowded urban centers in the Marshall Islands. He had also attended a private church affiliated school, the Seventh Day Adventist High School on Ebeye, but had dropped out after the tenth grade. At age twenty-five, he had decided to join the GED program in order to

complete his high school education, thereby allowing him to qualify for jobs with higher wages. By this time, he had married and had several children and was concerned about his ability to support his expanding family. He wrote in his entrance application that he wanted his children to know him as an educated and respected member of the community.

Vincent was one of the most promising of all the GED participants, but he never knew that he had passed the test and reached his goal. He committed suicide by hanging in the family laundry room in the interim after taking the GED test, but before the test results became available. Under the duress of family expectations, he again turned to alcohol. His wife had left him and the traditional extended family support group so important in Marshallese culture had broken down and was missing in the urban setting where he lived. Vincent had wanted his life to have meaning and purpose, but he had been unable to successfully integrate the demands of a changing society and tradition. In the writings that he left behind, he wrote that he had gone down a wrong path in high school and wanted to change. He had become involved with a group of friends who spent their weekends drinking and he had lost interest in school. He had written of his wife's pregnancy and how he hoped to change his life.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

VL: *Ebeye, Kwajalein*

BC: How old were you when you began school?

VL: *Unknown.*

BC: Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

VL: *Parents.*

BC: Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

VL: *Continuous.*

BC: Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems?

VL: *It was good, but he lost interest.*

BC: What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

VL: *His group of friends began drinking and lost interest in school.*

BC: Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?

VL: *Yes.*

BC: When did you drop out of school?

VL: *In the tenth grade.*

BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out of school?

VL: *Lost interest in school. Peer pressure.*

BC: When and how did you learn about the GED (General Education Diploma) program?

VL: *From friends.*

BC: Why did you choose GED rather than public or private high school to complete your education?

VL: *The GED program allowed him to finish high school. At the same time, it was quicker to get a high school diploma.*

BC: Have you found that GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?

VL: *Yes. Definitely.*

BC: Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands?

VL: *Yes. It was very valuable.*

BC: Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?

VL: *The written section of the test was difficult for him but he quickly mastered it. School had not been difficult for him. Perhaps that is why he lost interest in school and also one reason why he succumbed to peer pressure.*

BC: Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in government or private school?

VL: *Yes.*

BC: In what ways would you change the GED to make it more effective for Marshallese students?

VC: *It is a good program, even though it is not an easy test to pass.*

BC: What would you like to do after passing the GED exam?

VL: *He wrote about getting his diploma and looking for employment. He already had two children and his wife was pregnant with a third.*

BC: What are your plans for your future?

VL: *Vincent committed suicide by hanging in 1995 after his wife left him. He had taken the GED test and passed it, but he never knew it. His diploma is still in his file at the GED office. No one has come to claim his diploma.*

BC: Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?

VL: *It will help me get my high school diploma, and will also help me to find a job with higher pay.*

BC: In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students desiring to complete their education?

VL: *There is a lot of peer pressure to follow friends who spend more time partying and drinking than thinking about their future.*

For Vincent, the demands of a rapidly changing society and the subsequent breakdown of traditional cultural controls were not only incompatible but also lethal. Vincent is only one out of a growing number of young men who have taken their lives out of frustration and anger at their inability to assimilate desire and reality. Marshallese society needs to address the problems facing youth today if the culture is to successfully bridge the gap between tradition and a rapidly changing society.

## ***II. The Best Chance***

The second category of students entering the GED program includes the next four interviews. Each of these students spent their childhood in more traditional outer island communities where the highest level of education offered was the eighth grade. If they wanted to continue through high school, they were required to relocate to Majuro, the government center, where the only public high school was located.

Since outer the island communities have to a greater extent retained traditional family and cultural values, each of these students faced the often-intimidating task of balancing tradition with the desire to continue their education. For them, the rapid changes that had been occurring in the metropolitan centers were a distant but always enticing development. Until they moved to the urban centers, their only contact with the outside world had been the national radio station and the monthly government field trip vessels that collected copra (dried coconut meat), the nation's only cash export commodity, which is processed into oil. The wages earned from the copra trade was minimal yet sufficient to supplement their subsistent lifestyle, but it was not enough to purchase the luxury items pouring into the islands.

The employment for wages in government jobs that was so important in fueling the developing money economy in the urban areas was very enticing to these outer island residents. Many made the move to Majuro and Ebeye where the jobs were located, but employment was limited. While a few managed to secure employment, many others

became the disaffected and displaced within their own culture. They were living on the periphery of society on land belonging to others without easy access the important family support network.

Others began to realize that acquiring secondary education gave them a better chance at achieve their goal, and in fact was the key to success in their changing society. The GED program then began to gain recognition as the best chance for those who had not had the opportunity to attend secondary school to achieve their goal. The GED program in fact offered the only chance for some to complete their secondary education.

Each of the students in this category had the advantage of entering the program before the new more demanding GED regulations were implemented. Since some did not have any prior secondary education, they needed the flexibility of being able to pass each of the subject tests individually until all were passed. In this way, they could approach the test in a manner that was more compatible with their individual level of preparedness. This feature of the program gave students the opportunity to culturally modify the program to meet the needs of the community without actually changing the program.

In this was, the GED program became one of the mainstays of education in the Marshall Islands. It not only fulfilled a basic need for secondary education in the community, but was also accepted as an integral part of education in the Marshall Islands. GED was able to close some of the gaps in an otherwise inadequate educational system. It was the best chance for many who otherwise would not have had an opportunity to complete their education.



## ***INTERVIEW WITH BELLA ANKIN***

**Entered: 1967**

**Graduated: 1976**

Bella Ankin is representative of this second category of student. She was born and raised on Aur Atoll, and attended and completed eighth grade at Aur Elementary School located on Tobal, Aur. She was the eighth child but first daughter out of nine children whose parents who had little or no formal education. After elementary school graduation, Bella passed the test given to all graduating eighth graders from each atoll securing her entry into Marshalls Islands High School (MIHS), the one public high school in the Marshall Islands. However, when traditional cultural values and obligations to her extended family interfered with her educational goal, Bella dropped out of school.

When Bella heard about the GED program on the radio, she knew that she had found a way to complete her education. In 1967 at twenty-six, Bella entered the program. At the time that Bella was admitted to the programs, students could pass each of the five components (math, science, social studies, English grammar, and composition) of the test individually until they had passed all. In 1976, Bella received her high school equivalency diploma after successfully completing all components of the exam.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

***BA: I went to the public elementary school on Tobal, Aur.***

BC: How old were you when you began school?

***BA: I was six years old when I started school.***

BC: Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

BA: **I lived with my parents.**

BC: Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

BA: ***I finished the first through eighth grades at the public elementary school on Tobal Island in AurAtoll.***

BC: Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems? Explain.

BA: ***I liked going to school and didn't have any problems. Everything was good.***

BC: What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

BA: ***I didn't have any difficulties in school and nothing hindered my education.***

BC: Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?

BA: ***Yes. They were very helpful.***

BC: When did you drop out of school?

BA: ***I dropped out of school after I finished the eighth grade, because school on Aur ended at the eighth grade.***

BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out of school?

BA: ***My parents did not want me to leave the outer islands to go to Majuro for high school, because they needed me to stay on the outer islands to help take care of my younger brothers and sisters.***

BC: When and how did you learn about the GED (General Education Diploma) program?

BA: ***When I was 18, I came to Majuro for medical treatment and learned about GED from others who were in the program. I had always wanted to get my high school diploma and work as a secretary, so I applied to the GED program to complete high school.***

BC: Why did you choose GED rather than public or private school to complete your education?

BA: ***At that time (1967), I was working at JTPA (MCAA) Job Corps and couldn't attend regular classes at the high school. Since GED classes were offered at night, I could go to classes and work at the same time.***

BC: Have you found the GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?

BA: ***GED has helped me very much. In 1970 when I entered GED, I couldn't read or write English.***

BC: Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands?

**BA:** *Yes. Most definitely.*

BC: Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?

**BA:** *More difficult, but at that time we could pass one at a time until we had passed all five subjects on the GED test. That made it easier for me to pass all subjects. The first time I took the test in 1974, I passed only Social Studies, however, the second time I took it (1975), I passed the math. By 1976, I had passed the English test and was able to graduate.*

BC: Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in government or private schools?

**BA:** *Yes.*

BC: In what ways would you change the GED program to make it more effective for the Marshallese students?

**BA:** *In the past, it was easier to pass GED, because we could pass one subject at a time. Now students have to pass all subjects at once to get their diploma. I think GED should return to the way it was before.*

BC: What would you like to do after passing the GED exam?

**BA:** *Since I was a young girl growing up in the outer islands, I have always wanted to be a secretary. Now, after passing the GED exam, my wishes have come true. I am employed now as the secretary for the GED program, and can help others to get their high school diploma.*

BC: What are your plans for the future?

**BA:** *I am trying to further my education by taking classes at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI).*

BC: Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?

**BA:** *Yes. In 1970, I was still attending GED classes while working for JTPA. In 1971, the program was terminated. However, the Department of Education said they would hire JTPA employees if we received a letter recommending continued employment. If I couldn't meet a certain level of language proficiency, I would have lost my job. GED helped me meet those requirements.*

BC: In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students who desire to complete their education?

***BA: There are many challenges for Marshallese students, but I know many are having trouble paying for school.***

After Bella completed all of the sections of the GED, she was hired as the secretary to the Adult Education/GED program. Eventually, she was promoted to Administrative Assistant for GED, and remains the greatest advocate of the benefits of the program to the citizens of the Marshall Islands. ✓

### ***INTERVIEW WITH MWELONG GUSHI***

**Entered: 198?**

**Graduated: 1990**

Mwellong Gushi went to elementary school on the urban centers of Ebeye and Majuro until eighth grade, but her education was frequently interrupted. Her father was a health aide, and his job often transferred him to the outer islands. Following Marshallese custom, Mwellong always accompanied her parents helping to take care of her four younger siblings. She was the fourth out of eight children.

Both of her parents had attended primary school during the Japanese administration of the islands, but her father had completed Japanese school and was able to get further training. Mwellong's parents had always valued education and encouraged her to continue, but the frequent movement from one island to another had always prevented her from completing high school. It was not until a second public high school opened on Jaluit, one of the outer islands where her father was assigned, that she was able to attend high school. By that time, she was older and had children of her own. She subsequently

dropped out after tenth grade. When her children were in school, she heard about the GED program. It not only gave her an opportunity to realize her educational goal, but also prepared her with skills to start her own business.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

**MG:** *I was born on Namdrik Atoll in 1958, but my family moved to Ebeye, Kwajalein in 1962 when I was five years old. I attended first grade through sixth grade at the public school on Ebeye.*

BC: How old were you when you began school?

**MG:** *I started first grade in 1963 when I was six years old.*

BC: Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

**MG:** *I lived with my parents.*

BC: Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

**MG:** *My education was not continuous. I attended school on Ebeye from first to sixth grades, but in 1971, my family moved to Majuro Atoll. At that time, I went into the seventh and eighth grades at the government school on Majuro.*

BC: Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems? Explain.

**MG:** *I liked elementary school, and I didn't have any problems.*

BC: What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

**MG:** *My father was a health aide on the outer islands. We went to Mili, then Jaluit, and Namdrik. We returned to Majuro, and went to Namdrik again. I always went with my family when my father's job assignment changed. On each of these atolls I repeated the eighth grade, because there was no high school on these islands. I was the oldest in the class but I wanted to go to school. In 1975, the new government high school opened on Jaluit and I attended the ninth and tenth grades there.*

BC: Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?

**MG:** *The teachers and principal were always very helpful.*

BC: When did you drop out of school?

**MG:** *I dropped out of school in the tenth grade.*

BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out o school?

**MG:** *My parents could not afford to send me to high school. There was no cost to go to Jaluit High School, but the related costs were too much.*

BC: When and how did you learn about the GED (General Education Diploma) program?

**MG:** **I learned about GED from friends.**

BC: Why did you chose GED rather than public or private high school to complete your education?

**MG:** *I was older. It was the only way I could complete my education. My husband supported me and paid my tuition to GED.*

BC: Have you found that GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?

**MG:** **Yes.**

BC: Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands?

**MG:** *Yes. It is a good program for the Marshall Islands.*

BC: Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?

**MG:** *It was easier for me to complete high school with GED. It was more difficult in the government high school.*

BC: Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in government or private school?

**MG:** *Yes. I recommend GED.*

BC: In what ways would you change the GED to make it more effective for Marshallese students?

**MG:** *I would not change anything about the GED program.*

BC: What would you like to do after passing the GED exam?

**MG:** *I would like to continue my education at CMI (College of the Marshall Islands).*

BC: What are your plans for you future?

**MG:** *I would like to get my degree in business and start my own sewing business.*

BC: Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?

**MG:** *GED has made it easier to find employment.*

BC: In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students desiring to complete their education?

**MG:** *I think the biggest challenge to students in the high cost of education in the Marshall Islands*

Mwellong passed the GED exam when she was forty, and started her own sewing business. She now works to pay tuition for her own children to attend school. By encouraging them to value education, she has proved that it is never too late to attain your goals. Her struggle and accomplishments encourages others to follow her example.

### ***INTERVIEW WITH JOHN JOHN***

**Entered: 1994**

**Graduated: 1996**

John John was born and raised on Jaluit Atoll, and like many outer island children did not start school until he was older. Like Mwellong, John's father was a health aide, but his education and family life, unlike Mwellong's, had been steady and continuous. When John graduated from the eighth grade on Jaluit, he took and passed the test guaranteeing him a place at the only public high school, Marshall Islands High School. The high school is located on Majuro, the government center, so John had to leave his extended family behind and reside in the high school dormitory. Without his family around for support, the problems he encountered at MIHS overwhelmed him and he dropped out after ninth grade.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

**JJ:** *I attended Jaluit Elementary School in Jaluit Atoll.*

**BC:** How old were you when you began school?

**JJ:** *I was nine years old when I started first grade.*

**BC:** Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

**JJ:** *I lived with my parents when I attended elementary school, but I stayed in the dormitory when I moved to Majuro to attend Marshall Islands High School on Majuro. Sometimes I stayed with relatives on Majuro.*

**BC:** Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

**JJ:** *It was continuous when I attended elementary school. My father was a health aide on Jaluit. After elementary school, I went directly to high school on Majuro where I encountered problems and dropped out.*

**BC:** Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems? Explain.

**JJ:** *I felt good about my experience in elementary school. However when I was attending MIHS and living in the dormitory, I had a bad experience. Someone broke into the dormitory and took all the money my parents had given me for school expenses. They also stole all of my clothing except what I was wearing at the time.*

**BC:** What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

**JJ:** *I went to elementary school on Jaluit where my father was working. He was a doctor (health aide). When I finished the eighth grade, there was no high school on the atoll. I had to go to Majuro and live in the dormitory to attend high school. When all of my clothes and money were stolen in the dormitory, I didn't know what to do.*

**BC:** Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?

**JJ:** *When my clothes and money were stolen from the dormitory at MIHS, the principal and school staff told me they would help me find my clothes, but nothing was ever done about it. I didn't know what to do.*

**BC:** When did you drop out of school?

**JJ:** *I dropped out halfway through 9<sup>th</sup> grade. When the school didn't seem to do anything about helping me find my clothes I became very upset. At the same time, I didn't feel good about asking my relatives on Majuro for help. I was angry about what happened and I didn't have any more money for school.*



BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out of school?  
**JJ:** *When my money and clothes were stolen, there was no action or help from the school staff in helping me find them. This made me angry, and I dropped out of school.*

BC: When and how did you learn about the GED (General Education Diploma) program?  
**JJ:** *I learned about GED from friends.*

BC: Why did you chose GED rather than public or private high school to complete your education?  
**JJ:** *I needed to get my high school diploma, and GED seemed to be the best way.*

BC: Have you found that GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?  
**JJ:** *Yes.*

BC: Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands?  
**JJ:** *It was very valuable.*

BC: Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?  
**JJ:** *More difficult.*

BC: Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in government or private schools?  
**JJ:** *Yes.*

BC: In what ways would you change the GED program to make it more effective for Marshallese students?  
**JJ:** *I would not change the GED diploma.*

BC: What would you like to do after passing the GED exam?  
**JJ:** *I have already passed the GED exam. I am now attending CMI as a nursing student. After I finish my AS degree, I want to become a doctor.*

BC: What are your plans for the future?  
**JJ:** *I would like to continue my education and go on to medical school.*

BC: Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?

JJ: *It has helped me continue my education, and has allowed me to get into CMI.*

BC: In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students who desire to complete their education?

JJ: *There were no high schools on the outer islands. Today, there are more high schools.*

John passed the GED after several attempts. As permitted by the framework of the GED program at that time, he could pass each subject individually until he had completed all. After receiving his GED diploma, John applied to and was accepted at the College of the Marshall Islands in the nursing program. His goal was to become a health aide like his father. However, John's academic background and performance were inadequate for him to succeed and complete an academic course of study. He eventually dropped out of the nursing program CMI, and is now out of school altogether.

### ***INTERVIEW WITH JONITA WATAK***

**Entered: 9/1998**

**Graduated: Unsuccessful**

Jonita Watak attended elementary school on Ailinglaplap Atoll, an outer island. Like many children in the Marshalls Islands, she had been customarily adopted by and lived with relatives on Ailinglaplap. After finishing eighth grade on the island, she transferred to Rongrong (Ailinglaplap), a private Christian high school. When she was in the tenth grade, Jonita came to Majuro, the urban center, to continue her education and entered another private school, the SDA (Seventh Day Adventist) High School. However, her family found the tuition cost prohibitive and Jonita found it necessary to drop out after the

eleventh grade. When she learned about the GED program from others, she felt that the lower cost of tuition and the high school equivalency diploma offered would allow her to complete her education.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

**JW: *I first went to Ailinglaplap Elementary School.***

BC: How old were you when you began school?

**JW: *I was six years old.***

BC: Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

**JW: *I was living with some of my relatives.***

BC: Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

**JW: *I went to elementary on the outer islands (Ailinglaplap). After the eighth grade, I transferred to Rongrong (Ailinglaplap), a private Christian high school. In the tenth grade, I transferred to SDA (Seventh Day Adventist) High School in Majuro.***

BC: Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems? Explain.

**JW: *I felt good about elementary school and Rongrong, but I had tuition problems at SDA.***

BC: What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

**JW: *At SDA, the tuition was too high.***

BC: Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?

**JW: *Yes, they were very helpful.***

BC: When did you drop out of school?

**JW: *I dropped out of school in the eleventh grade.***

BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out of school?

**JW: *I had tuition problems at SDA.***

BC: When and how did you learn about the GED (General Education Diploma) program?

**JW: *I learned about GED from Bella, the Administrative Assistant at GED.***

BC: Why did you choose GED rather than public or private high school to complete your education?  
**JW:** *I chose GED because you can get your high school diploma and the cost is not too much.*

BC: Have you found that GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?  
**JW:** *Yes. The program fits my needs.*

BC: Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands?  
**JW:** *It is a good program for students who want their diploma and the cost is not too high. I recommend GED for Marshallese who have been unable to complete school*

BC: Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?  
**JW:** *It is more difficult.*

BC: Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in government or private school?  
**JW:** *Yes.*

BC: In what ways would you change the GED program to make it more effective for the Marshallese students?  
**JW:** *I would make it easier for Marshallese to pass the test.*

BC: What would you like to do after passing the GED exam?  
**JW:** *I would like to go on to CMI. (College of the Marshall Islands).*

BC: What are your plans for your future?  
**JW:** *I would like to go into nursing.*

BC: Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?  
**JW:** *I have not looked for a job yet.*

BC: In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students who desire to complete their education?  
**JW:** *I think that the greatest problem for Marshallese students is the high cost of tuition.*

Jonita did not pass the GED exam, and was unable to get her high school equivalency diploma. Not only had the schools she attended in the outer islands failed to prepare her for secondary school, but also the Federal guidelines and requirements of the GED program had changed, becoming more stringent. Students could no longer pass one subject at a time until they had passed all components of the test, while the minimum score required to pass was concurrently raised. The deficiencies in Jonita's education were too great for her to overcome in the standard fourteen-week GED instruction period.

The standard of education in the outer island communities has also been much lower than that which is offered in the urban center. Untrained teachers as well as the lack of teaching materials, along with poor facilities, has often defeated quality education in the outer islands. Consultants working for the Ministry of Education have also found disturbing evidence of increasing rates of illiteracy in both the English and Marshallese languages in outer island school systems. The standards must be raised in order to give outer island students an equal opportunity to attain quality education.

### ***III. The Alternate Choice***

All three of the students included in this third category had the disadvantage of entering the GED program after 1996 when the revised higher standards required to pass the GED exam were implemented. Under the new rules, a student had to pass all of the five subject components of the exam concurrently in order to qualify for the GED equivalency diploma. Although all students in this category have had the advantage of living in an urban center where change constantly confronted them, that advantage was insufficient to overcome the disadvantage of their low level of education. All students in this category were unsuccessful in passing the GED exam.

In this third category of GED students are three students who have either been caught between the desire to attend school and the high cost of private education, or they may have been excluded from entrance to public high school due to the overcrowded conditions faced by these schools. Ultimately, the GED program may offers them the only opportunity left open if these students are to complete their high school education.

At the same time, some parents may have even encouraged their children to enter the GED program, due to the fact that this fourteen-week program offers a faster way with less cost to accomplish the same goal as attending high school for four years. This circumstance is demonstrated by the younger age and the lower level of prior education of some of the students entering the program recently. It appears from this that many students and parents may actually be attempting to abbreviate the educational process

thereby obtaining the desired goal of a high diploma in less time with minimal effort and expense. As a result, the GED diploma has become the preferred choice for many students. The diploma, rather than the acquisition of educational skills, has become the goal.

However, this defeats the purpose of the GED program as an alternate high school diploma. Consequently, most fail to obtain their high school diploma since their prior academic background had been so limited. At the same time, the higher requirements of the GED program as well as the deteriorating standards of elementary education in the Marshall Islands have also contributed to fewer participants actually receiving their GED or any other high school diploma.

The end result of the dilemma faced by both students and parents in the Marshall Islands is that many students may drop out of school altogether at an early age and never return to any form of formal education. The fact that secondary education is optional in the Marshall Islands only compounds the situation. Consequently, many out of school pre-teens and teenagers have begun to form territorial gangs, becoming increasingly responsible for the unprecedented rise in juvenile crime in the islands. Statistics published by the criminal justice system in the islands show a real correlation between lack of school attendance and juvenile crime. When viewed in this way, the GED program may also fulfill a very needed social function in the Marshall Islands. Aside from offering students the chance to complete secondary education, the GED program may also have a secondary function by contributing to the social well being of the community as a whole.

## ***INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN NELSON***

**Entered: 9/1998**

**Graduated: Unsuccessful**

Susan Nelson is one of many students who fall into the third category of GED participants. The third of five siblings, Susan attended a private Christian high school affiliated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church. She excelled at school and was even chosen as a participant in the federally funded Upward Bound program for educationally disadvantaged students interested in attending college. However, she dropped out of school after the tenth grade and entered the GED program. As a high school dropout, she could not participate in the Upward Bound program, and lost the advantages that it offered.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

SN: *I attended elementary school on Majuro.*

BC: How old were you when you began school?

SN: *I started school when I was seven years old.*

BC: Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

SN: *I stayed with my parents.*

BC: Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

SN: *It was continuous.*

BC: Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems?

SN: *I felt good about elementary school. I didn't have any problems.*

BC: What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

SN: *The difficulty I had with SDA was that private school tuition is too high.*



BC: Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?  
 SN: *Yes.*

BC: When did you drop out of school?  
 SN: *I dropped out of school in the tenth grade*

BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out o school?  
 SN: *I had tuition problems at SDA.*

BC: When and how did you learn about the GED (General Education Diploma) program?  
 SN: *I learned about GED from friends.*

BC: Why did you chose GED rather than public or private high school to complete your education?  
 SN: *I chose GED because you can get your high diploma with less cost.*

BC: Have you found that GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?  
 SN: *Yes.*

BC: Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands?  
 SN: *It is a good program for students who want their diploma, and the cost is not too much.*

BC: Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?  
 SN: *It is more difficult than private school.*

BC: Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in government or private school?  
 SN: *I recommend GED.*

BC: In what ways would you change the GED program to make it more effective for Marshallese students?  
 SN: *No change.*

BC: What would you like to do after passing he GED exam?  
 SN: *I want to attend CMI (College of the Marshall Islands).*

BC: What are your plans for you future?  
 SN: *I would like to be either a teacher or a doctor.*

BC: Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?

**SN:** *I haven't looked for a job yet or applied to college.*

BC: In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students desiring to complete their education?

**SN:** *Most students have trouble with tuition.*

Susan was unable to pass the GED exam on her first attempt, and has since dropped out of the program altogether. However, she may have reentered either a private or public school and graduated with others in her class. If her goal was to pass this US standard test after the tenth grade, she may have been too ambitious with her limited background to have had a genuine chance to succeed. On the other hand, if she had succeeded, she would not only have been able to get her diploma earlier, but also at less cost. By attempting to disregard the guidelines of the GED program, Susan as and many others, have circumvented the purpose of the program. This may be one of many reasons why so many students fail to succeed.

### ***INTERVIEW WITH HENCHY KLIMENTE***

**Entered: 9/98**

**Graduated: Unsuccessful**

Henchy Klimente attended high school at MCHS (Marshalls Christian High School), a private boarding school located on Rongrong islet in Majuro Atoll. She dropped out of school after the tenth grade when she experienced problems at the school. She is the second of three siblings with one sister attending school at PICS

(Pacific Islands Central School) on Pohnpei and one brother at UES (Uluga Elementary School) on Majuro. Her parents had completed high school and encouraged all of their children to attend school. After she dropped out of school in the tenth grade, Henchy entered the GED program to finish her high school education.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

**HK: *The first school I went to was Rita Elementary School on Majuro.***

BC: How old were you when you began school?

**HK: *I started school when I was seven years old.***

BC: Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

**HK: *I stayed with my parents.***

BC: Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

**HK: *It was continuous. I went to elementary and middle school at Rita village in Majuro Atoll. When I started high school, I transferred to Rongrong, a private Christian school.***

BC: Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems?

**HK: *I had no problems in school. I liked school and did well.***

BC: What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

**HK: *At Rongrong there was never enough food for the students. I seemed to be hungry all the time. I couldn't study when I was hungry.***

BC: Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?

**HK: *The teachers always helped me with my studies.***

BC: When did you drop out of school?

**HK: *I dropped out of school in the tenth grade.***

BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out of school?

**HK: *Not enough food at the school and too much work.***

BC: When and how did you learn about the GED (General Education Diploma) program?

**HK:** *I learned about GED from an advertisement on the radio.*

**BC:** Why did you chose GED rather than public or private high school to complete your education?

**HK:** *I chose GED because it is a faster way to get your high school diploma.*

**BC:** Have you found that GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?

**HK:** *Yes.*

**BC:** Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands?

**HK:** *It is very valuable.*

**BC:** Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?

**HK:** *GED is more difficult than either government or private school.*

**BC:** Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in government or private school?

**HK:** *Yes.*

**BC:** In what ways would you change the GED to make it more effective for Marshallese students?

**HK:** *I would not make any changes.*

**BC:** What would you like to do after passing the GED exam?

**HK:** *I would like to continue my education at CMI (College of the Marshall Islands).*

**BC:** What are your plans for your future?

**HK:** *I want to go into nursing.*

**BC:** Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?

**HK:** *Yes. It helped me when I applied for a job at Momotaro Store.*

**BC:** In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students desiring to complete their education?

**HK:** *Most students have tuition problems.*

Like Susan, Henchy was unsuccessful in getting her GED diploma, because she did not have the knowledge necessary to pass the test. She too has since dropped out of the

GED program. Small private church affiliated schools like the one Henchy attended are more sought after for their ethical teaching than their rigorous academic standards.

Assumption Catholic Mission stands alone in offering students quality instruction. Many parents struggle to pay the high cost of tuition expecting that their children will be guaranteed a good education, but that is not always the case. Unfortunately, there are no regulations in the Marshall Islands to oversee and insure that all schools, private or public, abide by certain measurable standards of performance. In many instances both parents and students are misled into thinking that paying for education somehow makes it better.

### ***INTERVIEW WITH CATMINA DEVERA***

**Entered: 9/1998**

**Graduated: Unsuccessful**

Catmina Devera attended a small private high school affiliated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church. She had benefited from her cross-cultural Filipino-Marshallese family background that had brought her into contact with diverse cultural norms and divergent values. Her parents understood the importance of education and always encouraged her to complete her education, but Catmina dropped out of school after the tenth grade citing the high cost of tuition as the primary reason for this.

BC: Where did you first attend any school?

***CD: I attended DES (Delap Elementary School) on Majuro.***

BC: How old were you when you began school?

***CD: I was nine years old when I started school.***

BC: Were you living with your parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

***CD: I stayed with my parents.***

BC: Was your schooling continuous in this location or did you move before completion?

CD: *It was continuous. I went from first grade to seventh grade at DES. In the ninth grade, I was accepted at MIHS (Marshall Islands High School). However, I transferred to SDA (Seventh Day Adventist) High School during the school year.*

BC: Did you feel good about your school experience or were there problems?

CD: *I had a good feeling about elementary school. I didn't have any problems.*

BC: What were some of the difficulties you encountered that hindered your education?

CD: *The difficulty I had with SDA was that the tuition was too high.*

BC: Did school personnel (teachers, principal) respond with helpful suggestions?

CD: *No.*

BC: When did you drop out of school?

CD: *I dropped out of school in the tenth grade.*

BC: What was your immediate reason for dropping out of school?

CD: *I had tuition problems at SDA.*

BC: *When and how did you learn about the GED program?*

CD: *I learned about GED from friends.*

BC: Why did you choose GED rather than public or private high school to complete your education?

CD: *I chose GED because I can get my high diploma faster.*

BC: Have you found that GED has fulfilled or helped you to accomplish your education?

CD: *Yes.*

BC: Do you feel that GED has a valuable or even necessary place in the Marshall Islands?

CD: *It is a good program for Marshallese students. It is an alternate to high school.*

BC: Did you find GED more difficult or easier than either government or private school?

CD: *More difficult.*

BC: Would you recommend GED for students in the Marshall Islands who have not been able to complete their education in either government or private school?

CD: *I recommend GED to other students.*

BC: In what ways would you change GED to make it more effective for Marshallese students?

**CD:** *I would not change the program.*

BC: What would you like to do after passing the GED exam?

**CD:** *I want to continue my education and go to college.*

BC: What are your plans for the future?

**CD:** *I would like to attend CMI and study computer science.*

BC: Has attending GED helped you either to find employment or further your education?

**CD:** *I am working now in the family business.*

BC: In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge confronting Marshallese students desiring to complete their education?

**CD:** *The high cost of tuition.*

Catmina was unable to pass the GED exam on the first attempt, because her prior education had not given her the necessary academic skills to succeed. Like many others, the GED program's Federally prescribed higher requirements had prevented her from achieving her diploma. In fact, since the higher GED standards have been implemented, only a few participants have been able to successfully complete the GED exam.

## ***GED: An Assessment of the Problem***

Although the problems facing modern education in the Marshall Islands are revealed in the interviews with the GED participants, a workable and sustainable solution to counter these problems remains vague and inconclusive. Until recently, the GED program has proven beneficial in augmenting many of the inadequacies in the current educational system in the RMI. However, the recent elevated criteria required to qualify of the GED diploma have begun to render the program ineffective. It is no longer able to greatly influence the current dilemma facing education in the RMI, since fewer students are able to pass the exam. There is an even widening gap being created between those who have completed their education and those who have not. The problems facing education are becoming increasingly critical with the future progress of the nation in jeopardy.

The following interview conducted with the current Secretary of Education who only recently vacated her post as Director of Adult and Continuing Education under which the GED program is administered in the Marshall Islands gives another perspective for understanding the problems facing education in the RMI.

### **INTERVIEW WITH BIRAM STEGE**

Secretary of Education Republic of the Marshall Islands  
Director, Continuing and Adult Basic Education, 1994-2000  
College of the Marshall Islands

BC: Your experience in education in the Marshall Islands beginning with your experience as classroom teacher and your consequent advancement to elementary school principal in my opinion makes you one of the most qualified candidates to carry education into the new millenium. Your work with Adult and Continuing Education and GED at the College of the Marshall Islands has also given you the



added perspective to understand where and why education has had problems in the Marshall Islands. From your vantage point, what do you feel is the greatest challenge to education in the RMI?

**BS:** *There are many problems presently facing education in the RMI. The truth is that no real learning is happening, because no real instruction is going on. In some schools there are several classes in one room, while in other schools overcrowded conditions have necessitated dividing classes into two half day or split sessions. The best facilities are poor and inadequate, and teachers are poorly trained. Under these conditions, it is impossible for any real learning to happen.*

**BC:** I understand that for several years you were the director of the Continuing and Adult Basic Education Program affiliated with the College of the Marshall Islands. When did you accept this position and how long were you in this position?

**BS:** *That is correct. I was the Director of Continuing and Adult Basic Education program from 1994 until I accepted the position of Secretary of Education in June 2000.*

**BC:** Did the GED program come under your jurisdiction when you were the director of Adult and Continuing Education at the College of the Marshall Islands?

**BS:** *Yes, it did.*

**BC:** Do you know when and under what conditions the GED program became available to the Marshall Islands and under what Federal agency it falls?

**BS:** *I don't know the specific date or the precise circumstances when the Federally funded GED program became available to the citizens of the Marshall Islands, but I do know that it was accessible during the UN sanctioned US Trusteeship period which ended in 1986. The Program has then continued to receive US funding under the Compact of Free Association as part of the agreement between the United States and the Marshall Islands.*

**BC:** Can you explain the purpose of this program and what it has to offer to the indigenous community here in the Marshall Islands.

**BS:** *The US Department of Education calls it Adult Education. It provides basic skills and high school completion so that people can survive on their own with a chance to pursue a post secondary degree. The program aims to develop good citizens with a sense of pride and self-esteem. It lifts people up by helping them*

*to obtain a high school diploma that gives them an opportunity to find jobs. In this way, it helps the community as a whole to become self-sufficient.*

BC: In your opinion, why do you think that the Marshallese community has accepted the GED program as a desirable program to complete secondary education?

**BS:** *It has been accepted because it is just like any other method of education. GED provides another route to obtain a high school diploma for those who cannot go the regular way. Otherwise, that would have been the end for many. GED is a second chance for the completion of secondary education.*

BC: Since the GED program has been available to the Marshall Islands, has the program evolved in the eyes of the community into an alternate or even preferred way to obtain a secondary school diploma?

**BS:** *In the beginning, the program was not popular in the community, because the participants were viewed as problem persons or losers. Now it has become a very acceptable way to obtain a secondary diploma. People see the benefits of the program because it has allowed many to go on to college.*

BC: Why do you think GED may be viewed this way?

**BS:** *GED is a worldwide set standard of education. To pass the test is an indication of performance as well as success.*

BC: Do you think that public and private education has failed to meet the expectations and needs of the Marshallese community or could there be other factors involved?

**BS:** *Effectively GED is an alternative for those who seek a high school diploma, because even today secondary education is not mandatory in the Marshall Islands. School attendance is required only through the eighth grade. The result is that GED is one of the few ways available to those seeking high school completion. What has happened in the past is that GED has also been the only way available to many seeking a high school diploma. Only three hundred eighth grade graduates or approximately one out of five elementary school graduates enters public high school from middle school.*

BC: In your opinion, why do you think that this might have been the case?

**BS:** *There has been a lack of funding for education. At the same time, politics has also gotten in the way to improving existing programs. We can't even do the primary schools well and don't even have the resources to operate the existing high schools. Government policy has been no more high schools.*

BC: Have you been aware of any shift in the general age or background of the program participants such as from generally older to more younger students?

**BS:** *The participants have gotten younger because there is no where else to go.*

BC: How would you explain this?

**BS:** *There is a lack of high schools. On Majuro alone, there is only one public high school. Within the nation as a whole, there are only three public high schools. In Majuro, the capital, Marshall Islands High School (MIHS) has an enrollment of between seven hundred and eight hundred students and graduates about three hundred. Jaluit High School accepts three hundred students with one hundred completing. Northern Islands High School on Wotje accepts about three hundred students with again about one hundred graduating. This does not include the fact that of all students graduating from middle school, only a small proportion ever makes it to high school.*

BC: Have most of the program participants been successful? By successful, I mean, have most received a General Education Diploma (GED) high school diploma?

**BS:** *Many are successful, but many don't make it. They lack basic skills. There is progress but many give up since they may need several years to complete the program.*

BC: How would you explain this?

**BS:** *They lack the basics.*

BC: Since the GED course is a structured fourteen-week program, do you think that some students might be trying to complete their secondary education by trying to "beat the system" without doing the work required by attending a regular four-year high school and graduating? In other words, do you think some students might be trying to outsmart the educational system?

**BS:** *Yes. Many don't even come to class, but just come to take the test.*

BC: Are most program participants able to succeed or receive their GED diploma on their first attempt?

**BS:** *Most of the participants don't, but a very few do. The successful ones have usually had some schooling outside of the Marshall Islands.*

BC: How would you explain this?

**BS:** *Many students have a deficiency in the basic educational skills necessary to pass the GED test and succeed.*

BC: What do you see as the future of the GED program in the Marshall Islands since the GED test is based on US standards and most students have difficulty completing or even fail to pass this American standardized test?

**BS:** *That is why we instated a RMI High School Equivalency Program.*

BC: I understand that when you were the Director of Continuing and Adult education at the CMI, you were key in the development of the RMI diploma, a general education diploma that is more in line with the needs and background of Marshallese students. Can you please explain the RMI diploma, its goals, and projected success in the Marshall Islands.

**BS:** *Our goal was to offer an opportunity to pass. Standards were set based on several tests that participants had to work toward in order to achieve a diploma. Passing scores had to be comparative with those of regular high school graduates. In addition, the participants had to attain the CMI (College of the Marshall Islands) standard set for admission. It is not an easy test and participants have to work hard to meet certain requirements.*

BC: Now that the RMI diploma has been offered for the past two years, can you comment on both the success of the program and any problems it has encountered that may need to be adjusted in the future.

**BS:** *It has been successful. Students are not testing into the lowest CMI Developmental Level, but are entering CMI at the highest level. The problem I can foresee is that the program could backslide. I would then question if many could pass.*

BC: It would appear then that the Marshall Islands are beginning to take the initiative in their own hands to improve the educational standards of the nation. After years of accepting the standards of first the missionaries and then three successive administering authorities – German, Japanese, American – the Marshall Islands must decide what works best for them. Would you agree or disagree with this assessment of education in the Marshall Islands?

**BS:** *Yes, I agree. I think that we should build our own capacity and not bring in programs from outside. We need to believe in ourselves and put together a program of our own creation. We need to believe that we can do it.*

BC: In my paper, I have used the Marshallese word *katwon*, to describe current education in the Marshall Islands or any other rapidly changing society that is attempting to deal with modern global conditions that demand change and a degree of conformity. Although in a negative sense *katwon* implies an effort to manipulate or get what you want, in a positive sense it can also imply simply to adapt. Do you disagree or agree with the assessment?

**BS:** *I agree. You can use the Marshallese word 'katwon' to describe what is happening here in the Marshall Islands.*

BC: What do you see as to the future of education in the Republic of the Marshall Islands? What are some of the ways education can progress and succeed in the changing conditions we are facing?

**BS:** *What I would like to see is people standing up on their own and be able to go out from the RMI and compete as a proud and self-reliant people. However, if progress is to be made, attitudes must change about education. Our leadership has not valued education and has not pledged the level of funding necessary to attain progress or even to maintain the present conditions. They don't see the need for an educated population, because then people would go out of they way to achieve it. Values must change, and more leaders are needed who value education as a value worth having.*

The GED program has become an integral part of the education process in the Marshall Islands, and those students who have been unable to complete their education by conventional means have often looked to the GED program as an alternate way of completing their secondary education. The community as a whole has benefited from the program since many of its respected and productive citizens obtained their high school diplomas through GED.

As the RMI develops both politically and economically, education has also increased in value. The value of education, however, may be seen and understood by many as the means of obtaining the goals of economic prosperity and social prestige, rather than for the knowledge gained through education. This may also explain the perceived preference

of GED over standard educational means by some participants, since the same goal of a secondary diploma may be reached within the fourteen-week framework of the GED period with less time and effort required of the student.

When the higher standards for achievement of the GED equivalency diploma were implemented in the RMI, fewer students were able to take advantage of the program, since the educational standards within the RMI had not advanced at a comparative rate of improvement to allow for progress. Essentially, the GED equivalency diploma has become unachievable to the majority of students in the RMI.

In many ways, the standards of basic education in the RMI have even begun to decline. Although many factors may be involved in fueling this decline, foremost among these is the insufficient number of trained teachers on both the elementary and secondary levels. The lack of any real commitment by government leaders to the development of an appropriate curriculum is a tremendous problem. The low priority for the maintenance of old facilities and the lack of funding for the construction of new ones, has prevented progress from happening.

Faced with an impending crisis, government leaders began to explore alternate ways to allow students to obtain their secondary school diploma. It was decided then to offer a RMI equivalency diploma that was similar to but more in proportion with educational standards in the Marshall Islands. It was felt that this new diploma would not only offer students an alternate diploma, but also be one way of elevating the level of education of many elementary teachers. With this in mind, all teachers were given the ultimatum of either coming up to standard or being terminated.

## **THE RMI EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA: *The Response***

The widening disparity between the number of students who took the GED exam and those who passed the exam has presented an impasse to progress in education in the RMI. When solutions were sought to reverse the dilemma faced by increasing numbers of students with no educational alternative, the director of Continuing and Adult Basic Education (C/ABE) at CMI began seeking another option for those desiring to complete their secondary education. In consultation with the Board of Regents of CMI, and other government leaders concerned with education, the decision was made to offer an RMI equivalency diploma in line with the GED diploma. Although the RMI equivalency exam closely follows the guidelines of the GED program, the exam is more in compliance with the actual circumstances of educational in the Marshall Islands.

The RMI equivalency diploma that was developed by educators in the RMI and approved by the *Nitigela* (legislature) in 1999 specifically addresses those issues brought about by the higher standards of the GED exam that have made it almost impossible for many to obtain their high school diplomas. Although the standards of the RMI equivalency exam adhere closely to the entrance requirements of CMI, they also concurrently follow the basic design of the GED exam. The criteria that were agreed upon include the following:

1. Minimum age of seventeen
2. GED practice score – minimum 35 on composite score (math, science, reading, social studies)
3. SLEPT (Secondary Level English Proficiency Test) Score – minimum 40
4. Adherence to the program attendance policy
5. Minimum one semester of coursework
6. Teacher recommendation.

The RMI equivalency exam has achieved its projected objectives, and students who have entered the program have passed the test. According to records maintained by the Continuing and Adult Basic Education program at CMI, forty-six students received their equivalency diploma in 2000 while another forty-eight students passed the exam in 2001. Because the RMI diploma is proof of competency in basic educational skills, they can qualify for employment in the community. At the same time, an RMI diploma also fulfills the minimum entry level standards for admission to CMI, thus allowing students who pass the exam an opportunity for tertiary education.

The RMI equivalency diploma may not be accepted outside of the RMI as proof of success, but it has helped the Marshall Islands begin to set the standards for educational achievement in the RMI. Once this is accomplished, primary school standards will have guidelines to follow and maintain. In this way, the nation as well as its citizens will benefit. Consistent with the goals of the GED program, they will have the tools necessary to become productive members of the community, thereby increasing their standard of living and furthering the advancement of the community as a whole.



Although a GED diploma has always been valued for its high standards of competency, the RMI diploma has only been able to achieve a level compatible with that of the other public secondary schools in the RMI. If the quality of education is a priority in the RMI, constant vigilance must be maintained that the standard set by the RMI equivalency diploma is preserved. Only then can education progress in the Marshal Islands.

## CONCLUSION

### *KATWON: Acculturation Manipulation or Adaptation*

The single most important human trait that has allowed mankind throughout time to multiply and prosper against all odds, and to progress beyond all the other species, is the ability of humans to adapt or respond to changing circumstances. Without this unique capability, humans would have become extinct long ago. Culture is dependent on change, because any society that is unwilling to change stagnates and no longer serves the well being of the community.

Yet, conflict frequently accompanies change by forcing accommodation that is often compromised by some degree of cultural resistance. This is where the cultural concept of *katwon* emerges. It is one abstraction the Marshallese have unconsciously employed that has allowed them to retain a semblance of their traditional culture as they have dealt with the disruption of rapid social change. This concept of *katwon* within the culture has in many ways has facilitated the acculturation of change.

As one of the most important institutions in any civilization, education universally binds individual cultures together by ensuring that knowledge is preserved and passed on to future generations. In a rapidly changing community as represented by contemporary society in the Marshall Islands, the education system is faced with unprecedented challenges. If education is to continue to serve the needs of the community, it needs to adapt and balance the desired results to the existing conditions. Otherwise, there is no

hope for the future of the youth whose lives depend on sufficient educational skills to allow them to survive and prosper in this changing society.

Traditionally, education in the Marshalls has focused almost exclusively on the practical applications of learning, like canoe building or house construction rather than on questioning the theories supporting these applications. There was little room for individuality or interrogation, because out of necessity life on these small coral atolls meant that the needs of the community superceded those of the individual. In this way, order and harmony was insured within the community.

Western education on the other hand demands attention to theory and the explanation of natural events as justification for learning. Individual thought and accomplishment is not only encouraged but also rewarded. This approach to learning has been responsible in many ways for the great progress in science and technology so valued in Western society. Order and harmony within society then is more dependent on the individuals being in control of the events confronting their society.

As Western education became the standard in the Marshalls, the conceptual disparity between these two divergent concepts of education became increasingly apparent. If this Western is to succeed in the RMI, a new vision of what constitutes education must be developed. Concurrently, a new definition of the responsibility of the individual in securing an acceptable level of education is required. Once these hurdles have been crossed, modern Western style education will become valued in the Marshallese community for the advantages it offers for development and progress.

When the GED program became available to students in the Marshall Islands, it began to determine the standard for education in the community in a more defined way than before. The program has not only been accepted by the community, but also fills a void left by both perceived and actual deficiencies in standard education in the RMI. Where educational opportunities were once limited to elementary education with only limited secondary education available for a few students, the GED program was available to anyone who applied and had the perseverance to complete the program and pass the exam. In this manner, the GED program was instrumental in showing the community that secondary education was the right of every citizen and not only the privilege of the few.

In the Marshalls, the GED program slowly evolved beyond the stated purpose of the federally designed secondary school equivalency program to become the only way available for many students to complete their secondary education. By applying *katwon*, the Marshallese community has adjusted and acculturated a foreign developed program into one that has served the needs of their community.

In fact, there is some indication that a GED diploma may even be preferred in the community over standard education. Culturally, the goal-oriented aspect of the GED high school equivalency exam may be more compatible with the practical aspect of traditional education in the Marshalls. The definitive parameters of the GED program in many ways resemble more closely the unalterable aspects of learning tasks like sailing an outrigger canoe between distant islands.

A new definition and concept of time as it applies to education is also called for if education is to be understood and valued for its contribution to the social well-being of the

nation. Western education has always demanded extended concentration in both the practical and theoretical aspects of learning, while proficiency is judged by time spent as well as the level of achievement. The GED program may be sending a mixed message to the community by devaluing the time spent in obtaining secondary education.

Although it may be possible for students to obtain their secondary school diploma within the stated fourteen-week instructional period of the GED program, it is unlikely that many will succeed due to their low level of prior schooling. Yet many parents and students appear to be attempting this as a way not only to circumvent not only the lack of educational opportunities in the nation, but also to avoid paying the high tuition cost of private school education. However, if students are able to pass the GED exam within the parameters of the program, they will have succeeded in compressing four years of standard education within this shortened time frame. In this way, the opportunities for wage employment that fuels the growing dependency of the Marshallese on the money economy can be achieved with less time and effort.

The Marshallese community both wants and needs to address the issues of inadequate and costly educational opportunities in the nation. To do so, they may have again employed *Katwon* to manipulate the existing education system in order to achieve their educational goals sooner. The fact that younger students with lower levels of educational achievement are entering the program may be an indication that the community views the GED program more for the end results of the diploma than for the educational skills obtained.

In 1996, when the requirements to pass the GED exam were raised to include passing all components of the exam simultaneously with a higher overall minimum score, the program became unattainable for many. When this happened, the ability of this valuable program to serve the needs of the community was questioned. While many possibilities were considered, it was decided to offer another option to completing secondary school – the RMI equivalency diploma. Based on guidelines similar to the GED diploma is, it is more consistent with the existing condition of education in the RMI and is designed to be more attainable for students.

More needs to be done to bring education in the Marshall Islands into conformity with modern education, but the RMI equivalency exam is one step in right direction. Constant vigil must be kept that the standards of the RMI equivalency diploma are not permitted to decline. Only by constantly reviewing and increasing these standards, as the GED program has done in the past, can the RMI become successful in meeting the needs of the youth of the nation.

In May, when the College of the Marshall Islands confers AA degrees on its graduates, those students in both the GED and the RMI high school equivalency programs who have successfully passed these tests will be given their diplomas. These students will be dressed in a cap and gown of a different color, but they will join in the procession as well as the celebration. By this gesture, both the GED and RMI diplomas will have gained legitimacy for the achievement they represent. Although the graduation ceremony symbolizes a sense of pride in their accomplishment to all who attend the ceremony, it also proves that the community accepts and may even prefer these two alternatives to a

four-year secondary school education. It becomes apparent that the understanding of what education means and constitutes within the Marshallese community has undergone a transformation and adjustment through the cultural abstraction of *katwon*.

The future of the Marshall Islands is reliant on the ability of the Marshallese to again assimilate their rapidly changing conditions by adapting them to fulfill the contemporary educational and cultural needs of the community. The challenges that must be overcome may seem formidable, but they are not impossible to achieve if education is valued and protected for the youth of the nation. In order to accomplish this desired goal, the cultural abstraction *katwon* may hold the key to success. The use of the GED and RMI High School Equivalency programs as a way of circumventing the educational process may seem like short-sighted manipulation: the negative meaning of *katwon*. On the other hand, this manipulation makes some form of secondary schooling an achievable goal for a larger portion of the society, not just the few who can afford it. Thus education becomes installed as an important value in the whole community. This is the positive side of *katwon*: adaptation for the betterment of all. Seen this way, *katwon* may provide the only hope for the future of education in the Marshall Islands.

Lessons learned from the past may bring solutions for the future. Whereas the concept of *katwon* may have at first appeared to be a negative approach to culture change, it may actually be the key to future success. Contemporary Marshallese must gain insight by looking at the overwhelming tasks accomplished by those early seafarers arriving in the Marshall Islands from insular Southeast Asia who were masters at manipulating their island environment and adapting their culture to life on unproductive coral atolls. They

not only survived, but also prospered by molding their lives to the available resources.

The conditions that had at first appeared formidable became the foundation of their culture for many generations.



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